

**Statement of the Honorable W.J. “Billy” Tauzin,
Chairman
Subcommittee on Telecommunications, Trade,
and Consumer Protection**

**Hearing on
Air Bags, Car Seats & Child Safety**

April 28, 1997

I would like to welcome all of you to the Subcommittee's hearing on Air Bags, Car Seats and Child Safety. Those of you who joined us outside just saw a demonstration of the enormous power of an air bag. Although this device has the power to save lives, we have seen that when used improperly, it has the power to unleash tragic consequences.

To illustrate, let me share with you two stories. The first is Reva Dowell of Rock Island, Illinois, who collided head-on with a pickup truck. Ms. Dowell, a relatively short woman, was saved from near certain death by her air bag *and* her seat belt. It is important to note that without her seatbelt, her injuries would have been far more severe.

The other story is of a 5 year old girl we'll call Lucy. She was riding in the front passenger seat of her mother's minivan. As they traveled through an intersection, a sedan driven by a teenager pulled out in front of them and the two vehicles collided. Although it was only a moderate speed impact with only moderate damage to the two vehicles, both the driver and passenger side air bags deployed. While Lucy was wearing her seatbelt, she was

apparently sitting forward to play with the radio at the time of the accident. Lucy died some 20 hours later of head injuries sustained when the air bag deployed.

Lucy is not alone in her fate -- 38 other children and 25 adults have died car accidents where the air bag was a factor in their injuries. But is important to remember that Reva Dowell is not alone either -- well over 1,500 lives have been saved by air bags. We need to learn important lessons from stories like Lucy's and Reva's.

Stories like Lucy's have prompted some to call for the elimination of the air bag mandate and the ability to disconnect air bags at will. I think that it is important to note that in 1991 when

the Congress was considering the air bag mandate, it was House Republicans who alone opposed the mandate. I have always believed that consumers, when armed with complete and straightforward information, are a lot smarter than Washington gives them credit for. If we had it to do over again and knew then what we know today, I suspect the outcome of that effort would have been different.

But we are not in 1991 any longer, and there are now well over 50 million vehicles with some form of air bag equipment on the road today with 1 million more vehicles with dual air bags being put on the road every month. Second guessing what we should have done 5 years ago does not help -- we need to do something now.

Some have argued that the answer lies in so-called “smart” air bags, or in depowered air bags, or giving consumers “on-off” switches. But the problem with these supposed solutions is that even under the best scenarios they are months away from being widely available to consumers. Manufacturers need time to design and produce this equipment. We need to be cautious about any new technologies so that we do not end up in the same situation we are in today because we have prematurely forced a new technology on the American people. And we need to carefully think through the consequences of our actions for manufacturers, dealers, and most importantly, consumers.

I said when I became the Chairman of this Subcommittee that I wanted 4 things out of every hearing: (1) education for

Members, (2) education for the public, (3) identification of problems, and (4) proposed solutions. As far as I am concerned, the single best outcome for this hearing would be to have some simple, common sense rules that the American driving public could understand and use every day to reduce the risk and increase the benefit of air bags.

That is why I am so pleased that Dr. Martinez has joined us this morning. He will present a thorough list of “do’s” and “don’ts” that parents, drivers, and passengers can start using now to reduce the risk of injury in an automobile accident. He will tell us how starting *today* we can have fewer stories like Lucy’s and more like Reva’s.

I look forward to hearing from all of our witnesses today.